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Service-Learning programs for Romanian students – an analysis of the international programs and ideas of implementation

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Abstract

One of the most common definitions of Service-Learning (S-L) programs refers to the use of community-based projects to supplement traditional curricula of the students and to enrich “by doing” the subjects covered in the teaching environment. The aim of this paper is to present a review of the international S-L programs in higher education system (European and international Universities) and to analyze those ideas that could be implemented in Romania. While in most of the SL international programs, the agents involved in the delivery of the SL programs are the teachers, we will especially discuss those SL programs in which the agents are not the teachers, but specific categories of students. Specifically, we performed a case study of the Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education (“Babes-Bolyai” University, Romania), which, since 1992, has one of the most active Student Associations in Romania, i.e. Romanian Association of Psychology Students (RAPS). Also, the Faculty has several successful distance learning programs in Psychology, Special Education and Pedagogy. Thus, the Faculty has these two student-based categories of driving forces in terms of offering themselves SL activities: (1) a very active Association of students and (2) a large number of mature students from the distance learning study programs – most of these students are currently employed and/or have graduated another Faculty (some of them are also holders of PhD titles). Based on the literature review, we discuss here the possibilities to include these two categories of students in the Quality Assurance program of the Faculty, in terms of establishing their role as active agents of the QA process. These strategies should be based on the facts that: (1) the members of the Student Association have the potential to develop themselves as a culture with standards and values in the area QA at Faculty level, and (2) the category of mature (adult) students could bring, in a structured manner, an important insight to the other types of students at levels of career orientation, work-related expectations and humane-abilities development. Most important, the ideas of S-L programs implementation are analyzed from the perspective of internalization strategies of the European standards for internal quality assurance within Romanian higher education system.

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1. Introduction – Working definitions of Service-Learning in higher education systems

In the context of higher education at international level, one of the most common definitions of Service-Learning (S-L) refers to it as an educational tool that "...seeks to engage individuals in activities that combine both community service and academic learning. Because Service-Learning programs are typically rooted in formal courses (core academic, elective, or vocational), the service activities are usually based on particular curricular concepts that are being taught" (Furco, 2002).

When defining Service-Learning in higher education, it is often suggested that a distinction has to be made between community service and Service-Learning, as well as between volunteerism and S-L (Fiske, 2001; Furco and Holland, 2005). Thus, S-L distinguishes itself from community service and volunteerism by its connection with the learning environment (curriculum connection), i.e., S-L is a teaching and learning approach that can integrate community services and volunteerism with academic study, aiming to enrich the learning process (by a better understanding of course content and a broader appreciation of the discipline), to promote civic responsibility and to strengthen communities (Fiske, 2001; Bringle and Hatcher, 1996; Hanover Research, 2011).

This type of curricula-related Service-Learning activities is very common among American educational institutions (public schools, colleges and universities). Most of these institutions have a clear managerial structure of the Service-Learning programs, such as offices and regulations for crediting the S-L. Thus, almost one thousand post-secondary institutions are currently members of Campus Compact, which is a national coalition of institutions committed to civic purpose of higher education, i.e. offering the students the possibility to develop their civic responsibility in connection to the academic environment (Butin, 2005). Civic responsibility is defined as the active participation of an individual in the public life of a community (Gottlieb and Robinson, 2003).

Civic responsibility can be enhanced and developed through Service-Learning at following levels (Gottlieb and Robinson, 2003): (1) direct service – students have face-to-face contact with the service recipients (e.g. tutoring other students and/or recipients, serving meals at a homeless shelter, working with the elderly in a nursing home, helping visually impaired students to explore and familiarize themselves with the learning settings etc.); (2) indirect service – students are involved in a service without having to directly face the recipient (e.g. promoting the adoptions of animals, supporting environmental projects etc.); (3) advocacy – students inform and educate others (including other students) about specific aspects and/or a particular issue, aiming to eliminate the cause of a particular problem (e.g. producing informative posters and flyers about sexually transmitted diseases, about the prevention of domestic violence, writing letters to legislators etc.).

Several examples of the most common S-L activities involving students of the American universities are listed below (University of Maryland, www.umaryland.edu/islsi):

(1) Aging-related S-L activities – these S-L projects are aimed at assisting senior citizens, most often following the paradigm of Successful Aging (i.e. assuring the optimal interaction of the senior citizens with their environment). These projects usually involve visiting nursing homes, while students are informed about the aging process and about the special need of elderly people;

(2) Animals-related S-L activities – these projects are usually aimed at preventing animal cruelty and promoting animal safety, and they include visits to local animal shelters to assist and promote safe practices for animals;

(3) Civic engagement S-L activities – these projects are aimed at increasing public awareness, such as the motivation of students to express their vote or the level of preparation of students to become better decision-makers for their society;

(4) Disability awareness/support S-L activities – these projects aim at increasing the awareness level of students toward different forms of disabilities and toward the importance of care giving and support that can be offered by them to persons with special needs, especially to their peers (i.e. students with disabilities) within educational setting. Also, visits and care giving events involving students (including charity events) are commonly organized by institutions and NGOs dealing with persons with special needs;

(5) Education-related S-L activities - these projects include student tutoring or mentoring services. Also, they may involve continuing education or they may fundraise to provide scholarships for different categories of students;

(6) Environment-related S-L activities - these projects aim at promoting environmentally friendly practices and attitudes in community (e.g. participation of students at restoration projects of indigenous species, activities of promoting the local museums, activities of cleaning up the green squares and local landmarks etc.).

(7) Health-related S-L activities - this category of S-L activities promote healthy living styles as well as providing assistance to ill persons and individuals with special needs (e.g. helping special education students learn about hygiene, getting involved in charity events for children with chronic illnesses);

(8) Poverty-related S-L activities - these projects target-helping persons who are homeless and impoverished, by increasing the awareness of local authorities toward them and/or by offering direct help;

(9) Public safety-related S-L activities – these projects are aimed at promoting public safety through law enforcement (campaigns), preparing for and recovering from disasters (training and informational activities), supporting victims of abuse, and promoting peace in the local and global community (campaigns and dissemination of information);

(10) School improvement-related S-L activities - these projects aim at creating a direct impact on school safety and morale, and they can include activities of school beautification, character education, disability awareness in the school, and anti-bullying campaigns.

S-L activities have the potential to impact in a positive manner the cognitive and affective development of American students, including their academic performance (Astin et al., 2000; Astin, Sax, and Avalos, 1999). In their study on the assessment of how Service-Learning affects students, Astin et al. (2000) explored the comparative effects of service learning and community service on the cognitive and affective development of 22,236 undergraduate American students, that have participated in course-based community service (service-learning) during college (30%) or in some other forms of community-oriented activities connected with their curricula (46%), while the remaining 24 percent did not participate in any S-L activity. This assessment study indicates that S-L course and/or activities had significant positive effects on all the cognitive and affective outcomes measured, such as: academic performance (writing skills, critical thinking), values (commitment to activism and to promoting racial understanding), self-efficacy, leadership (leadership activities, self-rated leadership ability, interpersonal skills), choice of a service career and plan to participate in service after college. The authors point out that these positive effects of the S-L on the measured cognitive and affective outcomes might be partly explained by the fact that participation in S-L programs increases the chances for students to discuss and analyze their experiences with each other and to receive emotional support from the faculty (Astin et al., 2000).

The results of this study reveal that S-L programs are more likely to generate these kinds of student-to-student discussions that community services (Astin et al., 2000). Also, the most important factor associated with the positive S-L experience appears to be the level of student's interest in the subject matter, which supports the following conclusions regarding the functionality of S-L activities: (1) S-L experience enhances the understanding of the academic content of the course material, and (2) S-L is perceived by students as a learning experience (Astin et al., 2000). These findings support the idea that S-L has the potential to be included in the student's major field and encourage the internalization process of Service-Learning in higher education settings in those universities that did not yet elaborate clear strategies in this direction.

2. Model of Service-Learning institutionalization in higher education settings (Furco and Holland, 2005)

In a recent analysis of the American Service-Learning programs in higher education, Hanover Research (2011) presents a model of institutionalization of S-L within a given higher education setting (Furco and Holland, 2005), which can be used as a referential frame when assessing the efficiency of the S-L programs and the ways these programs affects the students. In their model of S-L institutionalization in higher education settings, Furco & Holland (2005) have identified the following five interdependent dimensions:

(1) Mission & Philosophy (i.e., establishing an operational and campus-wide definition for S-L, completing a strategic plan for advancing S-L, aligning S-L with the institution mission);

(2) Faculty Support & Involvement in S-L (i.e., enhancing faculty knowledge and awareness of S-L through faculty development, cultivating faculty interest in S-L, providing faculty with incentives and rewards to engage in S-L programs, as well as creating proper infrastructure to support S-L activities, encouraging influential faculty members to assume leadership roles in advancing S-L in the academic environment and partnerships in the community);

(3) Institutional Support for S-L (i.e., establishing a coordinating agency for S-L and community partnerships, establishing a policy-making entity for S-L standards and criteria for evaluation, providing adequate funding resources for S-L activities using both internal and external resources, ensuring that departments support and encourage faculty who engage in S-L, establishing a clear monitoring system for S-L activities, outcomes and partnerships, as well as an assessment plan for measuring impacts on students and identifying areas of improvements).

(4) Student Support & Involvement in S-L (i.e., establishing coordinated mechanisms that foster students' awareness of S-L opportunities and positive effects on their professional and personal development, establishing formal incentives and rewards that encourage students to participate in S-L, encouraging student representatives to participate fully in official activities designed to advance S-L, maximizing opportunities for students to participate in S-L and informing the students about them).

(5) Community participation & Partnerships (i.e., building awareness among community partners of the full range of S-L opportunities and possibilities, cultivating mutual understanding of needs and purposes between the campus and the community partners, welcoming and encouraging community agency representatives to participate fully in activities designed to advance S-L at institutional level).

While most the American universities providing S-L programs for students have clear procedures on all the five dimensions of the S-L institutionalization model (Furco and Holland, 2005), the S-L institutionalization process is still "in progress" in some of the European universities. We present below two cases of European universities in which community services and volunteerism are highly supported and encourage in connection with students' curricula, i.e. (1) University of Zaragoza - a Spanish university that, only in a few years, has managed to identify and implement institutionalization strategies of Service-Learning, and (2) Babes-Bolyai University – a Romanian university that for many years encourages community services, practical activities (credited activities) and volunteerism among the students and it has recently started to fulfill all the five dimensions of a successful S-L institutionalization process.

3. Case analysis of two European universities – S-L activities and the process of S-L institutionalization

University of Zaragoza (Spain)

The discovery of Service-Learning in Spain appears to be relatively recent (2003-2004), although the solidarity practices of schools and social organizations have a long tradition in the country (Battle, 2013). The solidarity practices are carried out without any curricular connection or without precise educational objectives. Even though there are lots of volunteering experiences, valuable in themselves, they can not be considered as being service-learning activities because they lack the component of intentional learning. However, these activities make a good base for further developments of S-L programs.

Several areas in which these community-oriented initiatives appear and are developed are: in primary schools and secondary schools, in social entities, in youth and leisure education movements, in universities, in initial vocational qualification (PCPI; Programa de Cualificación Profesional Inicial - Initial Vocational Training Programme), in special education, in training for the social inclusion of adults at risk of exclusion. In fact, there are more researches on the academic impact (in terms of learning outcomes of students) and less on the social impact (in terms of observable results in the concrete benefits of the community) of these initiatives observed in different contexts. In Spain, several universities are carrying out impact studies, but USA and Argentina universities have many years ahead at this level of investigations and the list of the studies is endless.

The purpose of the Service-Learning is to give more meaning to social learning academic and teach social responsibility to the university students. The S-L activities are not just practices of volunteering isolated from the set or body of knowledge and competencies that seek to take various educational plans, but they are teaching proposals that emphasize each degree-oriented approaches in order to motivate the students to get involved and to engage more in exercises concerned with ethical responsibility from the perspective of their future profession. Also, there are initiatives like The Jaime Bofill Foundation and the Octahedron Editorial, supported Ministry of Education and Science of Spain, who started a few years ago a strong line of publications and resources on the Service-Learning in educational contexts (Martínez, 2008).

The Service-Learning programs in contexts of higher education and specifically in colleges should place in the context of a university a training model that seeks to combine the academic learning with the training for active citizenship in real time. Therefore, the S-L programs should be integrated into all changes oriented towards a new university model aiming at providing higher quality and to include the exercise of social responsibility. It is about an university model also worrying about quality targets, about its training model and its teaching, research and transfer of knowledge in order to achieve a greater social inclusion, to train the graduates to act for achievement of the common good and a just and democratic society (Martínez, 2008).

The Spanish University Network of Service-Learning (APS-U) is an initiative of a group of university professors who incorporate the perspective of Service-Learning in Education and Research. The vision of the Spanish University Network of Service-Learning is the dissemination and development of educational and social projects based on the APS-U will help to improve the development, learning, training and welfare of our children and youth especially and its mission is to fortify the effective cooperation in the field of teaching, research and social action based on the APS-U between the Members of the Network and the institutions in which they work (The Spanish University Network of Service-Learning website). They have created a website that wants to be a virtual space for professionals from academia (or not from it) for exchanging information, experiences and Service-Learning resources.

Zaragoza University presents the Service-Learning as a methodology that provides a benefit in greater or a lesser extent depending on the case, to the entity or to the group that develops that practice. The APS-U practices aim to stimulate the students and the academic staff to develop curricula-based personal initiatives, as well as social and civic competences within the umbrella of social responsibility (<http://www.unizar.es/>). Within the context of social responsibility development, S-L presents similarities with the fieldwork and practical activities, but it also incorporates the goal of doing a service oriented toward the nearby community. To reach this goal, S-L requires the development of a network between the University and other institutions and associations belonging to the community.

The methodology for the practices through Service-Learning has a psycho-educational foundation that fully matches the demands of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA): constructivism, active learning, experiential learning, cooperative learning, global methodology and the principle of activity associated with social projection.

Zaragoza University develops learning experiences for its students, allowing them to more efficiently acquire academic professional skills. These experiences offer a special meaning to the education process, by placing the students in the center of the teaching-learning process and by offering them the possibility to adapt their professional skills to a more reality-oriented social or physical environment. Each learning experience aims to contribute to the holistic development of the students, leading the acquisition of generic and transferable skills (i.e., personal initiative, social and civic responsibility, social cooperation and professional ethics), that are encouraged to be developed not only through the objectives of Campus IBERUS, but also within EHEA. In order to ensure a meaningful learning process at Zaragoza University, each S-L activity is performed in collaboration with an external, public or nonprofit entity, such as Cáritas, CATEDU, Fundación Rey Ardid, Fundación Federico Ozanan, Fundación Alcoraz, Hermandad del Santo Refugio, Banco de Alimentos de Huesca etc.

Zaragoza University facilitates the contacts between professors, departments, faculties and other institutions or entities in order to collaborate and establish ways of sharing and exchange more practices of S-L (www.unizar.es). In this light, Zaragoza University has organized several national and international conferences and meetings aiming to disseminate the outcomes of the S-L programs implemented so far. Thus, we can conclude that Zaragoza University has managed to fill in most of the demands of the five dimensions identified in the model of S-L institutionalization (Furco and Holland, 2005).

“Babes-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca (Romania)

Babes-Bolyai University (BBU), ranked as one of the best Romanian universities in terms of quality of research and academic performance (SIR Global 2013; www.scimagoir.com), has for many years supported through its faculties two forms of Service-Learning activities (i.e., volunteerism and credited practical activities), even though no specific agency has been yet defined in terms of coordination of S-L at university level, such as a Service-Learning Office. Volunteerism is strongly supported through the activities coordinated by Student Associations of

BBU, while practical activities are supported at institutional level, by being included in the curricula of undergraduate students of several faculties, as a specific discipline called Practical Activity.

Among the associations of students that are currently active and supported by BBU, two of them have behind a long history of existence and active involvement in volunteerism, student-for-student activities and activities oriented toward the local community, i.e. Organization of Babes-Bolyai University Students (OSUBB) and the Romanian Association of Psychology Students (RAPS). Both organizations are aligned to the idea that volunteerism represents a tool of acquiring transversal competences related to the academic curricula, such as interpersonal skills, critical thinking and ability to organize and manage team-work based projects which are connected to their future professions and to their personal development as responsible citizens.

While looking at the activity of OSUBB over the years, one can easily consider that, through its wide connections to all the students of the faculties of Babes-Bolyai University, OSUBB has a strong potential to fulfill the first and the forth dimensions of the Service-Learning Institutionalization model (Furco & Holland, 2005), i.e., Mission & Philosophy and Student Support & Involvement in Service-Learning (e.g. establishing coordinated mechanisms that foster students' awareness of Service-Learning opportunities and establishing formal incentives and rewards that encourages students to participate in S-L). Also, several projects organized by OSUBB, such as Urban Fest, Junior Summer University (2008-2011), Job Shadowing for Students Project and The Role of Youth in Society: What do we want and what do they want, support the potential role of OSUBB on the fifth dimension of the S-L institutionalization model, i.e., Community Participation & Partnership. Through these projects, the participating students have reported that they gathered a greater level of civic responsibility, respect toward people (including people with disabilities), more level of awareness of their future professional opportunities, and that they became more confident and more willing to engage in team-work activities.

In addition and in collaboration with OSUBB, another active Student Organization functions within BBU for almost twenty years, that is the Romanian Psychological Association of Students (ASPR), located at the Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education (BBU). Through the whole academic year, ASPR is offering a wide range of projects to the undergraduate and Master students of the Faculty, targeting not only their professional, but also their socio-psychological development, such as: International Conference of Psychology Students, The Days of the Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education, trainings and workshop on professional- and civic responsibility-related aspects.

Most of these projects include Service-Learning activities, even though no specific Department of ASPR has been yet created for the management and promotion of S-L at Faculty level. However, due to the specific orientation of the Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education on educating and professionally preparing people to optimally interact with other people, the idea of a Service-Learning Office at Faculty level has been more and more supported by the members of ASPR and the other representative students of the Faculty. Also, ASPR is actively supporting and promoting the involvement of students in projects toward community coordinated by the academic staff of the Faculty, in collaboration with NGOs and institutions (Hospitals, Private Companies, Special Education Schools etc.). Thus, we consider that ASPR has a strong potential to contribute at the institutionalization process of S-L at faculty level, especially by establishing coordinating mechanisms to foster the students' awareness of service-learning opportunities that are connected to their curricula and by creating solid bridges between the academic environment and community.

A recent Service-Learning activity (2013-2014) within the category "students-for-students" performed by ASPR members in collaboration with other students of the Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education (BBU) is the Junior Psy-Sex Expert Project, in which undergraduate students (second year, Psychology) are involved in informing other students about the sexual health (attitudes, behaviors) and the scientific approach of human sexuality. Even though this project was designed to disseminate scientifically based information toward other students, it has attracted a strong interest from the local community, i.e. the organizing team was invited several times to promote sexual education at different community events. Moreover, this project has strongly motivated the involvement in the health education activities of a specific category of students of the Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education, the mature undergraduate students who are enrolled in the distance learning programs. Several projects are currently planned by RAPS and the student representatives of the Faculty in order to increase the motivation of the mature students (that are already employed and/or have already graduated another Faculty) to

get involved in Service-Learning activities and to participate to the curricula-related professional training and humane skills development of the other students.

4. Conclusion and discussions

Our qualitative analysis of Service-Learning activities which are currently offered at Babes-Bolyai University indicates that this Romanian institution, even though it did not yet created a specific Agency of Service-Learning activities at faculty and university level, it allows for the identification of clear elements and agents with high potential of Service-Learning institutionalization through all the five-dimensions described in the model of Furco & Holland (2005). Moreover, BBU is actively and continuously concerned about finding solutions for optimizing the interaction of the students with the community in the direction of their professional and humane development. In this light, following functional models offered by Hungarian and French Universities, a recently created structure at Babes-Bolyai University is the Student College of Academic Performance. The Student College includes a group of 50 students from all the faculties of BBU (undergraduate and master levels) that coexist and interactively work together on several interdisciplinary topics, during one academic year. The members of the Student College are selected based on their academic performance (learning outcomes) and their community-oriented activity (volunteerism, community service, campaigns, representatively work within NGOs and other types of associations etc.). The Student College is seen as an institutional Quality Assurance strategy to encourage performant students to become more visible to the community, by stimulating them to build-up an interdisciplinary network within them and with specialists from different fields of interests, such as national and international researchers, entrepreneurs, artists, teachers and representatives of successful NGOs and institutions.

In conclusion, the Romanian university (Babes-Bolyai University) analyzed by us from the perspective of the S-L institutionalization model of Furco and Holland (2005) has proven to successfully cover three of the five dimensions of the model, i.e. Mission & Philosophy, Student Support & Involvement in S-L and Community participation & Partnership. By already fulfilling these three dimensions, Babes-Bolyai University is now in the position to proceed to the achievement of the next two dimensions of the S-L institutionalization model (Furco and Holland, 2005): Faculty Support & Involvement in S-L (enhancing faculty knowledge and awareness of S-L through faculty development, cultivating faculty interest in S-L, providing faculty with incentives and rewards to engage in S-L programs, as well as creating proper infrastructure to support S-L activities, encouraging influential faculty members to assume leadership roles in advancing S-L in the academic environment and partnerships in the community), and Institutional Support for S-L (establishing a coordinating agency for S-L and community partnerships, establishing a policy-making entity for S-L standards and criteria for evaluation, establishing a clear monitoring system for S-L activities, outcomes and partnerships, as well as an assessment plan for measuring impacts on students and identifying areas of improvements). We suggest that the institutionalization process of S-L within the Romanian higher education settings would be optimized by the insertion of the S-L programs in the Quality Assurance plans of the faculties and universities.

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